

## Folklore & Nationalism in India and Serbia

### A Comparative Exploration<sup>1</sup>

Frank J. Korom

#### 1. Introduction

A generation of scholars has argued that nationalism was solely a product of the West, most importantly Europe. The Bengali Nobel Laureate in Literature Rabindranath Tagore (1917), for example, stated that his homeland, India, never had nationalism prior to British colonialism. A large reason for this is the landmark publication of Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), in which he argues that nationalism is essentially a political principle required by societies as they undergo the inevitable transformation from pre-modern agrarianism to modernity, industrialization, and secularization. Gellner argues that this process is necessary for homogenizing cultural forms that mirror the division of labor in modern western nation states, thus creating a so-called "high culture" that is distinct and separate from traditional forms of culture practiced by the peasantry. Along with this tendency to modernize culture, religion is also given a back seat to allow for the emergence of a cosmopolitan form of secularism. Moreover, Gellner, suggests that nationalism and modernity spread from Europe to other parts of the world as a result of colonialism.

Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities* (1991), essentially agrees with Gellner on the secular European origins of nationalism, but instead of envisioning it as a singular, totalizing phenomenon, he prefers to see it as a discourse fabricated by the ruling class to create an imagined "national" community that transcends linguistic, ethnic, religious, and racial diversity. While agreeing with both Gellner and Anderson's models as promoting a profoundly modular character of cultural homogeneity imposed on the emerging nation, Partha Chatterjee (1993: 21) significantly points out that in the case of India, no singular version of nationalism ever existed. As such, those models created for the study of nationalism in the West might not be appropriate for

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper titled "Religious Nationalism: India and Serbia Compared" was read as the keynote address at the Religion and Nation(alism): Entanglements, Tensions, Conflicts conference held in Tartu, Estonia, November 2016. A much shorter, significantly different version is to appear soon in a volume dedicated to Dan Ben-Amos. I also wish to thank the anonymous readers for their useful comments that led to the final revisions incorporated into this paper.

countries in South Asia, where totally different systems of beliefs and practices led to the formulation of completely different and distinct ideologies that transcended such principles as caste, class, and gender in the past and continue to do so in the present. Such ideologies that demand loyalty do not have the capacity to create a unified culture, primarily in places like India, where there is an incredible amount of diversity with which to contend (Sarkar 2016).

Peter van der Veer follows Chatterjee's intervention in his important book titled *Religious Nationalism* (1994), where he asks us to bear in mind that, "the centralizing force of nation building itself sprouts centrifugal forces that crystallize around other dreams of nationhood: nationalism creates other nationalisms—religious, ethnic, linguistic, secular—but not common culture" (14-15). He goes on to build upon Chatterjee's discursive strategy to investigate how colonial nationalism engaged with Indian traditions on the ground to create a variety of emergent strands of thinking that I have elsewhere termed "vernacular nationalism" (Korom 2006, 2010). Van der Veer essentially opens up the analytical field to search for nationalisms that are not essentially secular, so, while South Asia might not have had "secular" nationalism, *per se*, it most certainly had "religious" nationalism. In other words, one country's nationalism is not necessarily the same as another country's nationalism. Nationalism therefore begs for comparison, for larger structures sometimes impinge upon the actions of human agents to bring about similar ideological expressions that condition beliefs and behaviors, thereby constructing the sociopolitical orders of the day (van der Veer 2016). The works of liberal Marxist historians, such as Marshall Sahlins (1981, 1985), for example, make this quite clear, and folklorists have been aware of it for quite some time, especially within and among the Finnish School, where Herbert Spencer's (1876, 1896) concept of the superorganic played such a quintessential role concerning the movement of tales from one geographical region to another in remarkably stable form (e.g. Anderson 1923).

Although I am not advocating a return to the alluring yet problematic notion of the superorganic (Kroeber 1917), I do wish to make a call for a return to controlled comparison in which the objects or phenomena compared are carefully chosen, not randomly assembled. Thus, I will attempt to use two examples, one culled from Europe, the other from Asia, to examine whether or not a meaningful comparison can be made of nationalisms arising out of culturally and linguistically distinct yet structurally similar geographical regions.<sup>2</sup> My choice of Serbia and India has to do with the fact

---

<sup>2</sup> Smith (1982), who argues that differences are as important as similarities in comparative studies, influences my thinking here, since humanistic comparison simply demonstrates causal similarity rather than any true relationship or scientific conclusion. Comparisons must thus be grounded not in atemporal and non-spatial frameworks, as phenomenologists would have it, but rather in the real historical and ethnographic contexts of the exempla used.

that religion and its by-products played an important role in creating nationalist ideologies that bolstered the masses to act in ways that benefitted some but disadvantaged others.

In what follows, I wish to argue that there are some parallels to be made in terms of resource materials drawn upon by religious nationalist actors in my two case studies. Drawing upon a golden, mythical past, for instance, the deification of folk heroes, the anointing of sacred geographical sites, and the composition of epic poetry are all vehicles for the expression of a religious ideology constructed for nationalistic purposes in both contexts explored below. It is also my contention that such religious ideologies, once constructed, are then used to foment divisive ethnic politics that often lead to widespread communal violence. I conclude by suggesting that a comparative model is a better way to think about religious nationalism than simple isolationist analysis in which one single nation or culture is excised from the global context for the purpose of analysis, which has been the predominant model employed by folklorists (Baycroft and Hopkin 2012).

## **2. Comparatively Speaking**

Comparison, once the backbone of humanistic and social scientific research has been sidelined over the past few decades, as more culturally relativistic methods have proven to be more dynamic for meaningful cultural analysis. Despite this, comparison seems to be making a comeback, since globalization and transnationalism demand it, due to deterritorialization, which has led to broader frameworks for studying the so-called “transnation” (Appadurai 1996). Some would argue that this push for borderless studies is symptomatic of postmodernity, but is the current age in which we are living so utterly different from the age of colonialism in which nationalist ideologies were being formulated in Europe? Indeed, calls for walls and fences are resurfacing in both Europe and North America as a result of deterritorialization, which forces us to take a fresh, new look at the contours of the nation. As a resurgence of nationalism takes place in many locations, might we not want to rethink how we study similar phenomena in seemingly different contexts? What could be more different than India and Serbia? Good comparisons, I would argue, are based on significant differences, not just similarities (Smith 1982: 19-35).

## **3. Language, Religion, and the Folk**

When Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) wrote in his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772) that, “language is the harmonious expression of the human spirit” (Cocchiara 1971: 172), he was arguing that humans needed a method for concretizing thought into communicative expression. But even earlier, in his *Fragmente* (1767) he argued that oral poetry was the loftiest expression of a people’s character. A decade later, in 1777, he wrote that *Lieder* (songs) embody a nation’s collective “beliefs, feelings, perceptions, and strengths. A small collection of such songs...would give us a better idea of the nations mentioned in the idle chatter of travelers” (Cocchiara 1971: 176-177). Now, Herder was not saying that one culture was superior to another, but when he merged theology with anthropology in his *Ideen*, his works fell victim to the idolization of the German nation. The voice of the people thus became the voice of God, and God was to be conceived of as German (Cocchiara 1971: 181-182). Nationalism and religion are therefore strongly connected in his concept of *das Volk*.

For Herder, the folk are not objective about their lore, since they are “traditional,” yet the product of their aesthetic efforts is appropriated by the “modern” nation-state for the purposes of unification around a single principle. Since the modern nation state is supposed to be secular in nature, according to Gellner and Anderson, so the argument used to go, religious discourse cannot be a part of nationalism. Thus, people who later developed Herder’s notion of the folk for nationalistic purposes in Europe focused more on language as a secular and aesthetic vehicle for the propagation of a national ideology that glorified an essential ontological core based on ethno-linguistic identity. In other words, the assumption was that nationalism was based on a secularization theory that divided the traditional as religious and the modern as secular. In national epics, therefore, gods become heroes. But, as is often overlooked or under-emphasized, martyred heroes can also become gods. The cult of the deified dead makes no distinction between the sacred and the profane (Blackburn 1985), but does serve to bolster ethno-linguistic identity for nationalistic purposes. Apotheosis seemingly goes against Gellner’s basic assumptions concerning the formation of nationalism.

The three assumptions upon which European nationalism are based are: 1) the emergence of supra-local identities organized into nations, 2) the rise of authoritarian regimes within the public sphere that come to represent the state, and 3) specific ways of organizing the economy, namely by controlling the means of production and consumption (van der Veer 1994: 13). Using these three criteria, Gellner (1983), argues that growth, both social and personal, relies on homogeneity that promotes centralization for the purpose of achieving a standard literary culture in which all can participate. Such a shared culture must, by definition, be secular in nature. He also

argues that his teleological model of modernization is universal in nature. It has its origins in Europe, from where it spreads out across the globe via colonialism. One could also mention again that Anderson (1983) makes the same argument for print capitalism. Peter Berger, one of the crafters of secularization theory, more or less made the same claim in his *Sacred Canopy* (1969; see also Berger & Luckmann 1967).

It is precisely the teleological nature of Gellner's model that has been most heavily critiqued, first by Sally Falk Moore in a 1989 essay, which was then followed by van der Veer's 1994 study mentioned above, where he points out that a mechanical model of nationalism does not allow for local variation based on a number of circumstances ignored by Gellner's overgeneralized thesis. Van der Veer uses India as his example to demonstrate that religion is not simply erased in the process of nationalization, for the dichotomy between tradition and modernity simply does not apply to complex civilizations such as the Indic one, where tradition and modernity considerably overlap down to the ethnographic present to voice what Gaonkar and his associates (2001) refer to as "alternative modernity," of which there are many variants among postcolonial countries. I shall turn my attention to India later, but let us first look at Serbia, which went through a process similar in some striking ways to the ordeal faced by India.

#### 4. Serbia

Like within many other Balkan cultures, nationalism emerged among Serbs as a result of colonialism, in this case Ottoman rule (Vjekoslav 2002). The Balkan Wars that contributed to the decline of the Ottoman Empire during WWI led to increasing Serbdom that then later re-emerged during the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. Despite the fact that Serbian nationalists merged their goals of autonomy with the Yugoslavists, they supported a centralized Yugoslav state that guaranteed the unity of the Serbian people, which was solidified in the St. Vitus Day (St. Vid Day) Constitution (*Vivodanski ustav*) of 1920. The signing of the document led to a consolidated, centralized state under the Serbian Karadorđević monarchy, which was not popular among other ethnic groups within Yugoslavia, especially Croatia. This led to the popular motto of "Strong Serbdom, Strong Yugoslavia," but with more and more decentralization within Yugoslavia during the 1960s under Marshal Tito (1892-1980), a resurgence of Serbdom emerged in the 1980s, which led to a demand for a unified Serbian state in the 1990s, as the country was falling apart.

While a whole host of factors could be identified as fueling the fire for the preservation and growth of Serbdom over the centuries, most scholars agree that lore surrounding a medieval event known as the 1389 Battle of Kosovo was mythicized over time through hagiography, literary creations, and oral tradition, much in the same way as a medieval event in Ayodhya became memorialized in India, as we shall see. It was the event that occurred on Vidovdan (St. Vitus Day) where it is purported that the Serbian Prince Lazar sacrificed the kingdom of earth for the kingdom of heaven. The battle culminated in a number of Serbian uprisings against their Ottoman rulers that began in 1804. It thus came to be perceived as the decisive battle for Serbian independence against the Ottoman Turks or a holy battle between Christians and Muslims. Coincidentally, it was a Serbian linguist who, like Herder, came to glorify his own folk through the collection of oral epic lore that would memorialize and even mythicize the Battle of Kosovo (Pavlović 2009).

Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787-1864), to cite just one example, collected hundreds of epic songs in his multi-volume *Srpske narodne pjesme*, first published in Vienna between 1841 and 1862, among which was the so-called Kosovo cycle, acknowledged by most scholars as being central to the entire Serbian oral tradition, since it lays out in heroic detail the divine battle that is central to Serbian national identity even today. Meanwhile, in India another narrative of nationalism emerged at roughly the same time that the Serbian drama was unfolding.

## 5. India

Although the period of colonialism in India is normally identified with the British Raj, an earlier wave of colonialism began with the establishment of the Mughal Empire. This feat was accomplished by a Central Asian Turk named Zahir ud-Din Muhammad Babur (d. 1530), whose reign only lasted four years, but whose empire lasted for more than three centuries until the British Raj defeated it in 1857. It is said that Babur tore down a temple in Ayodhya, the mythical birthplace of the epic hero Ram, and replaced it with a masjid (mosque) in 1527. Like the Battle of Kosovo, the controversy over the Babri Masjid had its origins in medieval disputes between two religious groups, in this case, the Muslim colonizers and the Hindu colonized. In both narratives, Muslims are the antagonists and the colonized are the warriors of virtue who battle for a holy land ideologically constructed out of epic narratives. More will be said about this last point in my conclusion, but first we must delve into the beginnings of religious nationalism in India.

Hindu *rāṣṭravāda* (nationalism) began in the 19th century with the reform movements that were spearheaded by the so-called Bengal Renaissance, and associated with figures like Brahmo Samaj founder Ram Mohan Roy, and Arya Samaj founder Dayanand Saraswati. It gained its greatest momentum during the Independence Movement in the 20th century, however, during which cultural and political movements converged into a potent form of religious nationalism with the emergence of the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), organizations that are vital and very active in Indian politics today (Jaffrelot 1998).<sup>3</sup>

The term most associated with Hindu *rāṣṭravāda* is *hindutva*, coined in a pamphlet penned by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1922, which means Hinduness. Hinduness largely excluded and discriminated against religious minorities, especially Muslims. Savarkar's colleague Syama Prasad Mookerjee founded the nationalist Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), from which emerged the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the current ruling party in India, both of which advocate *hindutva*, the idea that India should be the place for the protection of Hindu people and their culture. It emphasized that social, cultural, and political institutions should be based on Hindu thought and practice, and to achieve this a return to the golden age of *rām rājya*, the righteous rule of Ram, based on Hindu dharma (duty) was absolutely necessary. In other words, *hindutva* ideology called for a new nation, a Hindu *rāṣṭra* free from the influences of outsiders.

The nationalist “family” (*parivār*) of organizations just discussed evolved as a counterforce against the Congress party that had ruled India for much of its existence since Independence in 1947. It gained ascendancy largely as a result of an event that occurred in the 1990s, around the same time that Yugoslavia was falling apart. I turn to that event now, then move on to consider comparable events in the former Yugoslavia. The event in question is the destruction of the aforementioned Babri Masjid in December of 1992. The BJP took measures to memorialize the incidents surrounding the destruction of the mosque by Hindu right-wing nationalists, which left many dead, both Hindu and Muslim. It is to this tragic event that I now turn before returning to Serbia.

## 6. The Babri Masjid Incident

---

<sup>3</sup> It is important to point out, however, that the RSS was never a political party. Instead, it was conceived as a cultural organization, which allowed it to work within other political parties, even within the Congress party. Its attitudes thus often oscillated from one position to another, in many cases advocating paramilitary activity, while in others siding with the British. See, for example, Islam (2017).

The Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was built in 1528 by the first Mughal emperor named Babur. Fifty years later a Hindu poet named Tulsidas began composing a Hindi devotional text called the Ramcharitmanas (a popular vernacular version of the Sanskrit epic Ramayana), resulting in the growth of Ram bhakti (devotionalism) throughout the region, including the construction of many Ram temples in Ayodhya, with many claiming the town to be the birthplace of the hero-god (Lutgendorf 1991).

According to some analysts, which Anand Patwardhan (1991) has brilliantly captured on film, the nineteenth century saw growing Hindu/Muslim unity that posed a threat to the ruling British Empire. The British Raj thus gave sanction to a rumor about Babur destroying a Hindu temple to build his mosque. Then, in 1949, militant Hindus broke into the mosque and installed a rām mūrti (Ram statue) in the mosque. The District Magistrate K.K. Nayar refused to remove the image, claiming communal discord, and the mosque was subsequently sealed off until the matter could be adjudicated in the court system, which has still not happened to this very day.<sup>4</sup> On December 23, 1949 a personal account disseminated concerning someone's vision of a boy Ram (4-5 years old) who appeared in the mosque in a great flash of light, at which time the lock on the precinct's gate miraculously broke off. In more recent times, a concerted video campaign telling of the miraculous appearance of the boy Ram was propagated to bolster support for the VHP (World Hindu Society) and the Ram Janambhoomi (Ram Birth Ground) cause.

Muslims have not been able to pray at the site since then, although Hindus continued to worship outside of the Babri gate with the help of a local pūjārī (ritual specialist). It was with this contentious history in mind that L. K. Advani, then head of the BJP (Indian People's Party), vowed to undertake a rathayātrā (chariot pilgrimage) throughout India to rally Hindu kar sevaks (volunteers) to proceed to Ayodhya for the purpose of tearing down the mosque to build a temple to Ram on that very spot, where many devout Hindus now felt was his exact birth place. October 30, 1990 was the predetermined date set for Advani's arrival in Ayodhya after the rathayātrā passed through many states in northern India, causing violence all along the way, during which thousands died or were seriously injured.

The VHP, the international cultural arm of the BJP, was called upon to rally the faithful throughout the world to send money and bricks to support the building of the temple. Once the so-called "pilgrimage" (yātrā) began, violence and death occurred at virtually every stop along the way, and despite the fact that Advani was arrested at one point but then released, they managed to stay on schedule to reach Ayodhya in conjunction with a real Hindu pilgrimage called the pañcakrośī yātrā, the

---

<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Hindu agitation in Ayodhya increasingly continues to pressure the government to build the temple without delay.



circumambulation of the holy precincts. This “coincidence” was, in fact, planned, so that the police would not be able to distinguish between pilgrims (yātrī) and kar sevaks, the so-called “volunteers” rallying around Advani to tear down the mosque. Thus, the volunteers were able to enter the sealed off area around the mosque. They were, however, unsuccessful in destroying it on that occasion, but the mosque was finally brought down brick by brick by Hindu mobs led by radical sādhus (Hindu mendicants) a few years later on December 6, 1992.

Advani went on to become the successful home minister of India during the first BJP period of rule. He was much later exonerated of all charges concerning incitement of religious intolerance and communal violence. The BJP rules India today under the guidance of the prime minister named Narendra Modi, who himself was a member of the RSS in his youth, and continues to sympathize with the organization in the present. During his earlier rule as chief minister of Gujarat pogroms against Muslims occurred as well, but with his rise to national power he, too, was absolved of any wrongdoing in his home state, despite earlier accusations, which even prevented him from receiving a visa to enter the United States. While all of this communal violence was fomenting in India during the 1990s, Yugoslavia was falling apart, due to civil war and a revival of latent Serbian nationalism that took on religious undertones.

## 7. Pre- and Modern Serbian Nationalism

As Branimir Anzulovic (1999) has noted, the Eastern Orthodox Christian countries of Europe developed differently from the Christian and Protestant ones, which resulted in the Serbian Orthodox Church having strong ideological ties with the nation well into the eighteenth century. But even as Serbs started establishing ties with Western Europe from then on, the Serbian Orthodox Church continued to exert influence on Serbian culture, as did an older tribal ethos, in which primordial mythology was used ideologically to resurrect pre-Christian hero cults. This, coupled with romantic ideas borrowed from Western Europe about vernacular language and folk art as the purest expressions of the nation’s soul, served as the platform for the establishment of a “greater Serbia.”

The Pagan revival drew inspiration from nineteenth century Serbian historiography and oral tradition about the contested cataclysmic exodus in 1690 from the Pannonian plain, called the Great Migration, the consequence of which was transforming Kosovo from a purely Serbian place to one occupied by Albanians. It also pushed the Serb Patriarch Arsenije, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, north to Karlovci in 1713, bringing him into direct contact with the Hapsburgs in Vienna. As a result, the

Hapsburgs gave the Serbian Church a status similar to that they had under the Ottomans, which resulted in a higher degree of political autonomy among Serbians than the Roman Catholic Church had over Catholics.

It was during the Arsenije Patriarchy period that Enlightenment thinking from the West influenced such people as Dositej Obradović (1739-1811), who pushed for stronger ties to the West by discouraging elements of Serbian culture that had nationalist overtones, such as Pagan survivals and folk poetry emulating heroes who died violent deaths defending Serbia. Others, such as the aforementioned Vuk Karadžić, followed the nationalist Vladika Petar Petrović Njegoš (1813-1851), whose dramatic poem *Gorski vijenac* ("Mountain Wreath," 1847) utilized religious symbolism to glorify the special nature of being Serbian by setting them up as the saviors of Europe who could expel the Turks, or die trying. These Romanticists, who were in opposition to the rationalists, were the ones responsible for reviving Pagan imagery and tribal ethos in modern Serbian literature. Their dedication to folk culture eventually swayed even the liberal Obradović. Later in his life he began collecting folk art and writing modern "folk" poetry in the Serbian vernacular, much in the same way that Rabindranath Tagore and Gurusaday Dutt did in India to instill a sense of vernacular nationalism among the urban intelligentsia.<sup>5</sup>

A central character that received increasing mention during this battle between rationalism and romanticism was Saint Sava (aka Stari Ras, d. January 12, 1236), who provided a bridge between the church, state, and nation beginning in 1219. Saint Sava, also known as The Enlightener, was a Serbian prince and Orthodox monk, the first Archbishop of the Serbian Church and the purported founder of Serbia law, thereby merging religion and the state, as Serbia became more autonomous (Anzulovic 1999: 23-24). In many respects, Saint Sava marks the beginning of classical Serbian history, while Obradović does the transition to the modern period. At first, these two figures may seem antithetical: Saint Sava was looking inward for a Serbian essence based on religion, while Obradović was outward looking, based on a western notion of a linguistically united nation state that was secular in nature. These two streams, however, would converge to create a modern form of religious nationalism. In fact, it was Obradović who introduced pan-Serbianism in 1783, when he coined the term

---

<sup>5</sup> By invoking Tagore's name here, I do not wish to suggest that he was in any way an advocate of *hindutva*, but rather to point out that he was inspired to use folklore (*lok sâhitya*) in a way similar to Serbian folklorists, which is to say, as a vehicle to rally nationalists to act for the cause of independence, even if it meant fabricating the lore itself. Similarly, Gurusaday Dutt did the same, based on ethnic and cultural distinctness (see Korom 2006, 2010). The main difference is that Tagore and Dutt did not advocate a separate Bengali state apart from India, whereas Serbs did. This is why I refer to it as "vernacular" nationalism in the Indian context, regional nationalism within a multicultural nation state.

“Slavoserbian” to refer to all of the areas that would become part of Yugoslavia, a united Slavia. In his *Mezimac* (1818), he wrote the following:

The Serbs are called differently in different kingdoms and provinces: in Serbia, Serbians, ...in Bosnia, Bosnians, in Dalmatia, Dalmatians, in Herzegovina, Herzegovinians, in Montenegro, Montenegrins. ...The most ordinary Serb from Banat or Bačka finds in Serbia, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Dalmatia, especially in Croatia, in Slovenia and Strem, his own native language and his people, whether they be of Eastern or Roman faith (Anzulovic 1999: 73).

The tension that divided the Romanticists and the Rationalists, however, continued to be religious in nature. Dositej advocated secularism, but Njegoš à la Saint Sava advocated the elimination of other religions, since they were deemed to be the dividing factor of a united and greater Serbia. This clearly echoes Savarkar's message in *Hindutva*, where he advocates a Hindu state based on the eradication of foreigners (i.e., Muslims). It was this conflict of the mythical and the rational that the historian Anzulovic (1999) sees as the spark that erupted into the conflagration that led to Yugoslavia's demise after the death of Tito.

## 8. A Folkloric Interlude

Before moving on to the nineties, a few words about Vuk Karadžić are in order, since it was he who really propagated the linguistic theory of Pan-Serbianism adumbrated by Obradović. Karadžić, though Montenegrin by birth, argued that all Štokavian dialects were Serbian (minus Čakavian dialects spoken in the Dalmatian islands, and Magyar, spoken in Banat and Bačka). Since all the linguistic groups that became part of Yugoslavia spoke these dialects, it was natural that they should form one nation. His position received the approval of German Romanticists, among them Jakob Grimm (1785-1863), who advised Karadžić on collecting folklore, which resulted in his magnum opus, the four-volume *Srpske narodne pjesme* (Serbian Folk Songs).

Karadžić's language/nation equation brought him into conflict with the Serbian Church, however, which equated religion with nation. But this conflict eventually subsided, since virtually all of the Štokavian speaking peoples fell under the Patriarch of Peć. The Church thus decided that it could continue to wield political power, so long as the majority of the people were under its religious jurisdiction. The problem was, however, that the imagined Serb people were split between those in the south who were ruled by the Ottomans and those in the north who were under the house of the

Hapsburgs, so while the northerners engaged in interacting with the Christian west, the southerners were more involved with attempts at liberation from the Muslim east.

It was during the period before WWI that the Serbian intelligentsia revived the Pagan solar deity Vid, who was a South Slavic war god, glorified in folk song as the defeater of Turks and Magyars. Vid was defeated with the advent of Christendom, just like Prince Lazarus was defeated in the Battle of Kosovo with the advent of the Muslim Turks, in both cases leading to the destruction of the Serbian state. Thus, the Battle of Kosovo mentioned earlier comes to be associated in folk tradition with the defeat of Paganism by Christianity. Later, Prince Lazarus, the loser at Kosovo becomes sanctified and associated with Saint Sava, both of whom become surreptitiously associated with Vid, since Vid's Day, the summer solstice, is also the day when the battle for Kosovo occurred. But because Vid was a Pagan god, the Serbian Church obviously did not celebrate him at first. However, religious authorities cleverly replaced him with the Biblical prophet Amos and the canonized Saint Lazarus as the object of reverence on that occasion.

The mythical associations above were propagated not by the perceived "folk," such as the rural peasantry of the Dinaric highlands who were identified with the Pagan-tribal ethos that originally worshipped Vid, but by the urban intelligentsia that harbored the patriotic myth of a greater Serbia, much in the same way that urban nationalists, such as Tagore and Dutt imagined the folk at roughly the same time in India (Korom 2006, 2010). As Anzulovic points out, Vid's Day first appears on Serbian calendars in the 1860s, the "time of the triumph of Vuk Karadžić's ideas and nationalist exuberance caused by progressive liberation from Turkish rule" (1999: 83-84), but becomes recognized as a church, national, and folk holiday in 1913, the year the Turks were defeated during the First Balkan War. On the same day the following year, a Serbian nationalist ignited WWI by assassinating the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne.

## 9. Returning to "Greater Serbia"

A number of other significant and symbolic events are associated with Vid's day, including a 1989 speech by Slobodan Milošević in Kosovo to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the famed battle infamously known as the Gazimestan Speech, in which he vowed to use arms to keep the Serbian people united. It should also be noted that just weeks prior to his speech, Lazar's remains were processed around Serb populated areas of Yugoslavia, where the relics were met by large groups of Serbian nationalists.

Milošević himself then moved around the fragmenting country on a political pilgrimage, much like Advani's rathayātrā in India, to trace the holy land known as Heavenly Serbia. This idea can be traced back to Saint Sava, who was convinced that the Serbian nation was chosen and holy because of its identity with one faith. From this perspective, there is no difference between the transcendental Serbia and the existential one. Myth and history thus blended together for the purposes of Serbian nationalism, which François Mitterand referred to as Serbian "imperialism" during his visit to Sarajevo on Vid's Day in 1992. The resurrection of a Dinaric Pagan heroic ethos associated with the cult of Vid had become part of the patriotic spirit of the Serbs, as Yugoslavia was breaking apart to the point that even the Serbian Orthodox Church accepted it, despite apologetics that would later emerge (Dobrijevic 2001; Vukomanović 1999).

In both India and Serbia, then, heroic epics and movement across sacred landscapes by politicians emulating heroic figures to rally the nationalist masses played out, each with tragic consequences. In India it led to the destruction of a minority religious place of worship that was an archaeological monument and to the further deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relationships. In the former Yugoslavia, it led to the destruction of an entire nation, including genocide committed against Muslims during civil war there. In both cases, religious nationalism targeting the Muslim Other, fomented extreme violence for the purposes of political ascendancy based on religious identity just as much as on linguistic identity.

## 10. Conclusion

Having provided a summary of two series of events separated spatially by over three thousand miles, let me conclude with a few brief observations. Although India and Serbia are very specific places with their own unique histories, their differences invite comparison on the question of religious nationalism. To begin with, both countries were colonized by alien others who practiced different religions. As a result, these others became demonized as antagonists in mythic epics that were composed to elevate certain heroes to the status of divine king and to advocate a utopian golden age. For India this was the era of the rule of Ram during the mythical satya yuga, the age of truth. For Serbs it was the brief reign of Petar I, which ran just from 1903-1914 (Anzulovic 1999: 89). In both places, the golden age is connected to a sacred place, so that Ayodhya takes on cosmic meaning for Hindus and Kosovo does the same for Serbs.

In both instances, medieval events triggered a long period of fomentation that resulted in the revival of militant nationalism in the pre- and modern period,

especially in postcolonial times. Tulsidas wrote the *Ramcharitmanas* to elevate the hero Ram to divine status, while guslars, the oral poets later studied by Albert Lord (1960), made the hero Lazar into a saint. Modern intellectuals who were also amateur folklorists, such as Rabindranath Tagore in India and Vuk Karadžić in Serbia, revived such hagiographies in their respective attempts to bolster the idea of building a vernacular culture based on a monolingual theory of nationhood as part of a freedom struggle. For Tagore it was Bengali, for Karadžić it was Serbian. Advani and Milošević continued this pattern in postcolonial times by mimicking divine heroes to bolster religious nationalism.

Regional narratives that became national myths developed over several centuries, but they were then appropriated and revived in the 1990s. Contemporary politicians used the same heroic narratives of Ram and Lazar respectively to rally militants based on misguided religious sentiment. In both cases, the revitalization of national myths concerning sacred ground, tinged with ideas about “chosen people,” led to the demonization of religious others. In the final analysis, it cannot be denied that it was religion that served as a purportedly unifying principle. In India, Advani called for all Hindus to unite against Muslims, while Milošević called on all Serbian Orthodox Christians to unite against Roman Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks. The big difference, however, is the issue of scale. After all, the Babri Masjid affair did not bring about civil war and the destruction of an entire country in India, whereas in Yugoslavia, the nation could not be saved. However, what characterizes both, albeit on noticeably different scales, was violence instigated against an alien Other blamed for the subjugation of a majority group that was linguistically and religiously different from the subjugator, or at least perceived to be.<sup>6</sup>

The ultimate lesson to be learned here is that the secularization thesis advocated in the 1960s proved wrong. Berger, himself, one of the most important crafters of secularization theory in the sixties, even recanted his theory in 1999 with the publication of *The Desecularization of the World*, in which he argued that grand dichotomies between east and west do not often work. Indeed, in the two case studies analyzed here, one “eastern,” one “western,” I would argue that much can be gained by

---

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the linguistic distinction between Hindi-Urdu and Serbo-Croatian are based on virtually the same components. Both hyphenations are essentially the same languages from a formal, grammatical perspective, but they use scripts associated with different religions. Hence, Hindi is written in Devanagari script and associated with Hinduism, while Urdu is written in a modified Perso-Arabic script and associated with Muslims. Similarly, Serbian is written in Cyrillic and associated with Eastern Orthodoxy, while Croatian is written in Latin script and associated with Catholics. It has been religious affiliation that has separated the two in post-conflict times. Urdu, now the official language of Pakistan must be seen as different from Hindi, the lingua franca of India, just as Serbian must be seen as different from Croatian in order to distinguish independent nations from each other.

looking comparatively at countries as dissimilar as India and Serbia, where the uses and abuses of folklore were proved to serve similar political agendas.

## References

- Anderson, Benedict  
 1991 *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso.
- Anderson, Walter  
 1923 *Kaiser und Abt: die Geshichte eines Schwanks*, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia.
- Anzulovic, Branimir  
 1999 *Heavenly Serbia: From Myth to Genocide*, New York: New York University Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun  
 1996 *Modernity at Large*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Baycroft, Timothy and David Hopkin  
 2012 *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century*, Leiden: Brill.
- Berger, Peter L.  
 1969 *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, New York: Anchor Books.
- Berger, Peter L(ed.)  
 1999 *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann  
 1966 *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York: Anchor Books.
- Blackburn, Stuart  
 1985 "Death and Deification: Folk Cults in Hinduism," *History of Religions* 24(3): 255-274.
- Bošković, Aleksandar  
 2017 "Serbia and the Surplus of History: Being Small, Large, and Small Again," In U. Hannerz and A. Gingrich(eds.), *Small Countries: Structures and Sensibilities*, pp. 195-212, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Chatterjee, Partha  
 1993 *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cocchiara, Giuseppe

- 1971 *The History of Folklore in Europe*, Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.
- Dobrijevic, Irinej
- 2001 “The Role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in National Self-Determination and Regional Integration,” *Serbian Studies* 15(1): 103-110.
- Gellner, Ernest
- 1983 *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Gaonkar, Dilip Parameshwar(ed.)
- 2001 *Alternative Modernities*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Islam, Shamsul
- 2017 *Indian Freedom Movement and RSS: A Story of Betrayal*, Delhi: Pharos Media and Publication Pvt. Ltd.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe
- 1996 *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Javarek, Vera
- 1956 “Material from English Writers in the ‘Mezimac’ of Dositej Obradović,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 34(83): 426-442.
- Karadžić Vuk Stefanović
- 1875 *Srpske narodne pjesme, 4 Volumes*, Beču: U nakladi Ane udovice V. S. Karadžića.
- Korom, Frank J.
- 2010 “Gurusaday Dutt, Vernacular Nationalism, and the Folk Culture Revival in Colonial Bengal,” In Feroz Mahmud(ed.), *Folklore in Context: Essays in Honor of Shamsuzzman Khan*, pp. 257-273, Dhaka, Bangladesh: University Press Ltd.
- 2006 “The Role of Folklore in Tagore’s Vernacular Nationalism,” In Krishna Sen, (ed.), *Tagore and Modernity*, pp. 34-58, Kolkata: Dasgupta & Co. Pvt. Ltd.
- Kroeber, Alfred L.
- 1917 “The Superorganic,” *American Anthropologist* 19(2): 163-213.
- Lord, Albert B.
- 1960 *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lutgendorf, Philip
- 1991 *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Moore, Sally Falk
- 1989 “The Production of Cultural Pluralism as a Process,” *Public Culture* 1(2): 26-49.
- Njegoš, Vladika Petar Petrović



- 1847 *Gorski vijenac*, Vienna: Mekhitarist Monastery of Vienna.
- Obradović, Dositej
- 1818 *Mezimak*, Budim: Slaveno-srbska pečatnja Kraljevskago vseučilišta vengerskago.
- Patwardhan, Anand
- 1992 *Ram ke Nam (DVD)*, Bombay: Patwardhan Productions.
- Pavlović, Aleksandar
- 2009 "Rereading the Kosovo Epic: Origins of the 'Heavenly Serbia' in the Oral Tradition," *Serbian Studies* 23(1): 83-96.
- Sahlins, Marshall
- 1985 *Islands of History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1981 *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Sarkar, Sumit
- 2016 "Nationalisms in India," In D. M. Peers and N. Gooptu(eds.), *India and the British Empire*, pp. 135-167, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Savarkar, Vinayak Damodar
- 1942 (1922) *Hindutva*, Poona: S.R. Date.
- Smith, Jonathan Z.
- 1982 *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Spencer, Herbert
- 1876 *Principles of Sociology, 3 Volumes*, New York: D. Appleton and Company.
- 1896 *Social Statics*, New York: D. Appleton and Company.
- Tagore, Rabindranath
- 1917 *Nationalism*, London: Macmillan and Company, Limited.
- Veer, Peter van der
- 2016 *The Value of Comparison*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- 1994 *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Vjekoslav, Perica
- 2002 *Balkan Idols: Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Vukomanivić, Milan
- 1999 "The Role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Protection of Minorities and 'Minor' Religious Communities in the Former Yugoslavia," *Facta Universitatis* 2(6): 15-22.